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[< Back](#) | [Home](#)

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Officials discuss cleanup of Kalamazoo River

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A panel of city officials, Environmental Protection Agency and Department of Environmental Quality representatives, teachers and scientists will discuss their concerns about the Kalamazoo River and its cleanup in an upcoming public forum.

The event, sponsored by Western Michigan University's Environmental Institute and Students for Sustainable Earth, was organized by Sarah Hill, associate professor of environmental studies and anthropology at WMU. She hopes the evening will be informative, both for WMU students and the greater community.

"In talking with my neighbors and friends, [I discerned] that few people that I know had much familiarity with the broader issues, despite the fact that Kalamazoo River is has been on the Superfund list for years," Hill said. "I presume that many, many interested people don't know very much."

For nearly 18 years, the Kalamazoo River has been on the EPA's Superfund List, which highlights it as an area of national environmental concern. The EPA chose to focus on the Kalamazoo River after decades of pollution filled the river with harmful polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs). Area paper mills discharged PCBs until environmental standards were tightened in the late 1970s.

In the 80 miles of the river, estimates range between 100-300 thousand pounds of PCB sediment, and PCB pollution has been linked to a variety of serious health impediments.

Despite this, it has only been in the last few years that the EPA has taken any action. It was not until March of this year that steps were announced.

The current actions of the EPA are the result of closed-door meetings, which would violate Michigan's Open Meetings Act. However, the federal agency is immune. Hill cites this as a contribution to the lack of public knowledge on this issue.

"The EPA had developed its current plan for the Plainwell Impoundment sediments without any input or awareness on the part of local residents and elected representatives," Hill said. "I simply wanted to know how that was possible, and whether the current plan would be detrimental to residents of the city, and if so, whom."

Two representatives from the city council, the EPA and DEQ, as well as professors of geosciences and biological sciences will help to provide information on both the history of the problem and the cleanup efforts to date.

"It will also cover research on PCBs, human and environmental health, the history of the existing Allied Paper landfill site and, I'm hoping, alternatives to the current plan," Hill said.

She expects the audience will gain a basic understanding of the various concerns, a solid overview of solutions and are enabled to provide informed feedback to administrators over how a major element of

the local environment is treated.

"I hope, quite simply, that attendees will be better informed," she said. "What they do with that information is important, but the forum is not intended to guide them on that."

"Kalamazoo River and PCBs: A Public Education Forum" is a featured event of WMU's Earth Week and will take place from 7 to 9 p.m. Thursday, April 12, in the Bernhard Center's Brown and Gold Room.

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